

Society for
Visual Anthropology

AAA GUIDELINES FOR THE EVALUATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA

AAA STATEMENT

PRODUCED BY THE SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

NOVEMBER 28, 2001; REVISED MAY, 2015

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA (SPECIFICALLY FILM, VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPHY, DIGITAL MULTIMEDIA, AND EXHIBITION) PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE PRODUCTION AND APPLICATION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND FORM AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE DISCIPLINE'S COURSE OFFERINGS AND RESEARCH OUTPUTS. ANTHROPOLOGISTS INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCTION AND CURATION OF VISUAL WORKS MAKE VALUABLE SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DISCIPLINE. IN ADDITION, ANTHROPOLOGISTS INCREASINGLY INCLUDE PROJECTS OR PRODUCTIONS THAT INCORPORATE VISUAL MEDIA AS PART OF THEIR *CURRICULA VITAE*. DEPARTMENTAL AND UNIVERSITY COMMITTEES FOR HIRING, PROMOTION AND TENURE ARE CHARGED WITH JUDGING THE SCHOLARLY QUALITY OF THESE NON-PRINT PUBLISHED WORKS. YET NOT ALL REVIEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS—EVEN THOSE WHO ARE ANTHROPOLOGISTS—BRING APPROPRIATE EXPERIENCE OR TRAINING TO THEIR EVALUATION OF VISUAL MEDIA AND NO STANDARD GUIDELINES EXISTED UNTIL THE CREATION OF THIS DOCUMENT, ORIGINALLY IN 2001. THIS DOCUMENT REFLECTS THE CURRENT EVALUATION OF VISUAL MEDIA IN THE CREATION AND DISSEMINATION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE IN 2015.

COMMITTEES TASKED WITH APPRAISING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA AS ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DISCIPLINE—TO TEACHING, SCHOLARLY RESEARCH, AND APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY—CAN BENEFIT FROM EVALUATIVE CRITERIA. MANY DEPARTMENTS AND PROGRAMS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY USED THESE GUIDELINES SINCE THEIR INITIAL CREATION IN 2001 BUT THERE WAS A NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXPANSION OF THE FIELD BEYOND THE ORIGINAL DOCUMENT'S FOCUS ON ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM AND STILL PHOTOGRAPHY. ACCORDINGLY, THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, UNDER THE ADVISEMENT OF THE SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY, OFFERS THESE REVISED GUIDELINES FOR THE EVALUATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA.

EVALUATING ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA

FIRST, THE AAA URGES COMMITTEES TO EVALUATE ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA AS AN APPROPRIATE VEHICLE FOR THE PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE. FILM AND VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPHY, EXHIBITION, AND DIGITAL MULTIMEDIA PLAY INCREASING ROLES IN RESEARCH, AS MEANS FOR BOTH DATA COLLECTION AND KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION. ADDITIONALLY, THEY ARE CRUCIAL AS TEACHING TOOLS IN THE DISCIPLINE'S COURSE OFFERINGS, AND THEY ARE OFTEN USED IN KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION IN OTHER PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS.

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OFFER VIEWERS A MEANS TO EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTAND ETHNOGRAPHIC COMPLEXITY, RICHNESS AND DEPTH, WHICH ARE THE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE. VISUAL MEDIA CONVEY CRITICAL FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE THAT WRITTEN ACCOUNTS CANNOT. FURTHER, THE CONTENT OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA IS NECESSARILY BASED ON RESEARCH. ITS EFFECTIVENESS IS HONED BY FAMILIAR RESEARCH TECHNIQUES INCLUDING: (1) LONG-TERM ETHNOGRAPHIC ENGAGEMENTS; AND (2) INTERVIEWS AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION. WHILE ETHNOGRAPHIC MEDIA PROVIDE ACCESS TO VISUAL AND ACOUSTIC WORLDS OF PRACTICE AND BELIEF, THEY ALSO MAKE AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITIES TO CONTEMPLATE AND EXPERIENCE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY AND OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD. THE IMPACT OF AND CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY MAY BE LESS OVERT IN SOME ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA THAN IT IS IN PRINT PUBLICATIONS, ALTHOUGH THE THEORIZATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS AND CULTURAL MEANINGS ARE AT TIMES MADE EXPLICIT THROUGH MECHANISMS SUCH AS TITLE CARDS, VOICE-OVERS, BY FILM SUBJECTS THEMSELVES, AND THROUGH ACCOMPANYING TEXTUAL RESOURCES SUCH AS RESOURCE GUIDES AND WEB SITES. FURTHER, WORKS SUCH AS ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS AND DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA (SUCH AS MOBILE APPLICATIONS AND INTERACTIVE GAMING) ARE INFORMED BY AND PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEORETICAL ANALYSIS, THEORETICALLY-INFORMED INNOVATIVE METHODS, INTERPRETATION, AND UNDERSTANDING.

INDEED, THEORIZATION ALWAYS INFORMS THE PRODUCTION PROCESS AND FRAMES THE MAKING OF ALL ETHNOGRAPHIC MEDIA. SHOT SELECTION AND COMPOSITION, VISUAL MONTAGE, IMAGE/SOUND JUXTAPOSITION AND NARRATIVE SEQUENCING ALL ARE DESIGNED TO PRESENT THE AUTHOR'S INTELLECTUAL INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS. ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA THEREFORE LINK TEXTUAL ARGUMENTS WITH VISUAL AND SENSORY KNOWLEDGE. THIS INTRINSICALLY ALIGNS THEORY AND DOCUMENTATION IN THE TRADITION OF PRINT SCHOLARSHIP.

SECOND, THE AAA URGES COMMITTEES TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION THE TECHNICAL AND SCHOLARLY WORK ENTAILED IN PRODUCING ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA. THE GOALS, METHODOLOGY, FIELD RESEARCH, DESIGN, AND EFFECTIVENESS OF VISUAL WORKS MAY BE JUDGED BY CRITERIA FAMILIAR TO ANTHROPOLOGISTS. AS WITH GOOD WRITING, VISUAL WORKS TYPICALLY REQUIRE GREAT EFFORT, INVOLVING SUBSTANTIAL AMOUNTS OF INTELLECTUAL INVESTMENT AND TIME. THEY ARE OFTEN BASED ON FIELDWORK OF THE SAME DURATION AND SOPHISTICATION THAT ARE REQUIRED OF PRINT-BASED ETHNOGRAPHIES.

SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERLYING FIELDWORK, PRACTICE, THEORY, AND METHODOLOGY

AS WITH WRITTEN WORK, MUCH OF THE INTENSIVE FIELD RESEARCH THAT UNDERLIES FILM, VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPHY, MULTIMEDIA WORK, AND EXHIBITION IS NOT VISIBLE IN THE FINAL PUBLICATION. COMMITTEES FOR HIRING, PROMOTION, AND TENURE SHOULD BE AWARE THAT IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM PRODUCTION, FOR EXAMPLE, FAR MORE FOOTAGE IS SHOT THAN IS USED, AND THAT ALL

FOOTAGE—USED AND UNUSED—MUST LABORIOUSLY BE INTERPRETED AND EVALUATED USING KNOWLEDGE GAINED THROUGH LONG-TERM PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION FIELDWORK. EVEN SHORT VISUAL WORKS AND SHORT-TERM EXHIBITIONS REPRESENT AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF INTELLECTUAL LABOR. FOR EXAMPLE, INDEPENDENT OF PREPARATORY FIELDWORK, THE EDITING AND OTHER POST-PRODUCTION TASKS INVOLVED IN A FILM CAN EASILY CONSUME MULTIPLE HOURS FOR EVERY MINUTE OF FINAL SCREEN TIME. BECAUSE OF THE NECESSITY OF ACQUIRING FUNDING, IN SOME CASES VISUAL WORKS REQUIRE THREE TO FIVE YEARS TO PRODUCE. IN THE CASE OF OTHER DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA SUCH AS MOBILE APPLICATIONS AND INTERACTIVE WEBSITES, THE RESEARCH, STORYBOARDING, CODING, AND BETA TESTING IS LABOR INTENSIVE.

NO MATTER WHAT THE ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA OUTPUT, MOST VISUAL WORKS ARE COLLABORATIVE ENTERPRISES AND OFTEN INVOLVE A COMPLEX DIVISION OF LABOR. IN ADDITION, UNLIKE TRADITIONAL PRINT PUBLICATIONS, THE DISTRIBUTION AND DISSEMINATION OF VISUAL PRODUCTIONS REQUIRE ONGOING EFFORTS AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION ON BEHALF OF ITS AUTHORS TO ACTIVELY NETWORK, INCLUDING SUBMITTING AND PRESENTING VISUAL RESEARCH AT FESTIVALS, EXHIBITIONS, AND CONFERENCES AND PARTICIPATING IN Q&A SESSIONS FOLLOWING THE PRESENTATION.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION AND THE SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY STRONGLY RECOMMEND THAT ACADEMIC EVALUATORS SEEKING TO DETERMINE THE SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA WORKS CONSIDER WHETHER THE RELEVANT PRODUCTS SHOULD BE CATEGORIZED AS: (1) RESEARCH FOOTAGE AND DOCUMENTATION THAT ADDS TO THE HISTORICAL AND /OR ETHNOGRAPHIC RECORD, OR IS USED FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS (SUCH AS LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION) OR OTHER TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION (SUCH AS DANCE AND ART); (2) ETHNOGRAPHIC MEDIA THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THEORETICAL DEBATE AND DEVELOPMENT; (3) INNOVATION IN NEW MEDIA FORMS; (4) MEDIA DESIGNED TO ENHANCE TEACHING; (5) MEDIA PRODUCED FOR TELEVISION BROADCAST AND OTHER FORMS OF MASS COMMUNICATION; (6) MEDIA MADE WITH AND/OR FOR THE BENEFIT OF A PARTICULAR COMMUNITY, GOVERNMENT OR BUSINESS; (7) CURATION OF FILM AND MEDIA FESTIVALS; AND/OR (8) CURATION OF EXHIBITS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA AND ART.

WE RECOMMEND THAT COMMITTEES PROACTIVELY USE VISUAL MEDIA SPECIALISTS FROM WITHIN THE FIELD OF ANTHROPOLOGY WHEN PROCURING EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS. ANTHROPOLOGISTS WHO ARE NOT EXPERTS IN VISUAL MEDIA MAY FAIL TO RECOGNIZE COMPONENTS OF PRODUCTION, EDITING, AND DISTRIBUTION THAT A MEDIA SPECIALIST WOULD BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY AND EVALUATE. CANDIDATES SHOULD BE ASKED TO PROVIDE DOCUMENTATION OF THE EXTENT AND SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO VISUAL MEDIA WORKS, DETAILING THEIR SPECIFIC

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ROLES(S) AS: PRODUCER, DIRECTOR, PHOTOGRAPHER, EDITOR, PRODUCTION ASSISTANT, CURATOR, ACADEMIC ADVISOR, OR WRITER.

COMMITTEES SHOULD BE AWARE THAT THE INCLUSION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL WORKS IN CURATED MEDIA FESTIVALS AND EXHIBITIONS ARE ACCEPTED VENUES OF HIGH-LEVEL PUBLICATIONS FOR THESE WORKS AND ARE CONSIDERED WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE TO BE FORMS OF ACADEMIC PEER REVIEW. LETTERS FROM FILM FESTIVAL CURATORS AND STATEMENTS FROM FILM FESTIVAL JURIES, AS WELL AS CURATORIAL COMMITTEES FOR EXHIBITIONS MAY ASSIST THE EVALUATION OF THE SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTION OF THESE WORKS. SCREENINGS IN ACADEMIC VENUES AND PUBLISHED REVIEWS IN SCHOLARLY PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS PRESENT ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE OF A PROJECT'S SIGNIFICANCE. WE ALSO RECOMMEND THAT CANDIDATES PRESENT EXTERNAL LETTERS OF SUPPORT ADDRESSING THE WIDER SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA WORK. COMMITTEES SHOULD CONSIDER THESE DOCUMENTS AS WELL AS THE CANDIDATE'S PROJECT PROPOSALS AND MONOGRAPHS AS STRONG INDICATIONS OF THE SCHOLARSHIP, CONCEPTUAL ARGUMENT, AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL WORKS.

THE SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY IS DEDICATED TO PROMOTING THE STATUS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA IN ANTHROPOLOGY. IT HAS BEEN JUDGED BY THE GOVERNING BOARD OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION TO BE BEST SUITED TO PROVIDE GUIDELINES FOR THE EVALUATION OF FILM AND RELATED AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIA IN THE CONSIDERATION OF HIRING, PROMOTION AND TENURE.